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Saint Xavier U. Suspends Professor for E-Mail Message

By RICHARD MORGAN

Saint Xavier University has suspended a professor who called a cadet at the U.S. Air Force Academy a "disgrace to this country" in an e-mail message that also derided the military's "aggressive baby-killing tactics." Administrators at Saint Xavier had already forced the professor, Peter N. Kirstein, to apologize, and the Chicago university also issued an apology of its own.

Richard A. Yanikoski, Saint Xavier's president, declined to comment on the decision to suspend Mr. Kirstein and referred reporters to a statement he issued on November 15. At that time, he placed the professor on a sabbatical leave for the spring-2003 semester and said that Mr. Kirstein had "volunteered" for a "periodic review of tenured faculty."

Any future faculty contract with the professor will include a requirement that he "adhere both to institutional policies and to the norms of the American Association of University Professors in matters relating to the proper exercise of academic freedom and extramural activities," the statement continued. (At Saint Xavier, all tenured faculty members have annual, individual contracts.)

Mr. Yanikoski's letter came on the heels of a November 12 editorial in *The Wall Street Journal*, which described Mr. Kirstein's criticism as that of an "all too believable ... uncivil bully.... At least one university president was willing to stand up to his faculty," the editorial continued.

The suspension was immediately criticized by leaders of groups that support academic freedom. "If [Saint Xavier's interpretation of academic freedom] were applied to all members of the faculty in all matters of public contention -- war and peace, abortion, gay rights, civil rights, affirmative action -- you could punish a very high percentage of the faculty," said Alan Charles Kors, a history professor

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at the University of Pennsylvania and president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. "It is bad enough that we have political correctness from the left," he continued. "We certainly don't need a new wave of it from the right. Silencing people is never a solution."

Mr. Kors's group plans to fight any punishment that Saint Xavier imposes because, he said, otherwise "we are saying that the academic world is too weak to live with the freedoms granted to other Americans."

Stephen H. Balch, president of the National Academy of Scholars, agreed with Mr. Kors. "On today's campuses, the policing of untoward expression usually rests in the hands of bureaucrats driven by little more than ideological prejudice or the need to appease internal and external constituencies," he said. "Further licensing of their power to sanction what they consider to be provocative speech is unlikely to improve an already bad situation."

The AAUP norms to which Mr. Yanikoski referred are included in the group's 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure. "When [professors] speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations," the statement says. "The public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution."

The controversy began last month, when Robert Krupiel, a first-year cadet at the Air Force Academy, sent e-mail messages to numerous professors seeking advice about the annual Academy Assembly, a student political-debate forum. The theme of this academic year's assembly, to be held in February, is "America's Challenges in an Unstable World: Balancing Security With Liberty."

Mr. Krupiel's e-mail request sought advice about how to publicize the event at the recipients' institutions.

On October 31, Mr. Kirstein, a professor of history in Saint Xavier's department of history and political science, replied with an e-mail message of his own that read, in part:

"You are a disgrace to this country and I am furious you would even think I would support you and your aggressive baby-killing tactics of collateral damage. Help you recruit. Who, top guns to reign death and destruction upon nonwhite peoples throughout the world? Are you serious sir? Resign your commission and serve your country with honor. ... You are unworthy of my support."

Mr. Kirstein's response spread through an online grapevine, enraging other cadets at the Air Force Academy and military supporters.

Mr. Kirstein's message also upset Mr. Yanikoski, who received so many e-mail messages about the incident that he drafted a form letter in reply. He wrote that he agreed "completely" that Mr. Kirstein's action was "tasteless, unprovoked, rude, unprofessional, and indefensible."

He added that "Prof. Kirstein is free to hold views critical of the military if he wishes to do so, but he is not free to issue demeaning, degrading statements *as a professor* in or outside the classroom."

Mr. Kirstein, in response to a barrage of angry e-mail messages and letters, apologized to Capt. Jim Borders, director of the Academy Assembly and an instructor of political science at the Air Force Academy. "I did not mean to impugn his character," Mr. Kirstein wrote to Captain Borders about Cadet Krupiel. As a pacifist and "one who believes in nonviolence and the avoidance of conflict," he wrote, "I could have been more circumspect in my communication."

According to Cadet Krupiel's parents, who were reached at their home in Pennsylvania, Air Force Academy rules preclude their son from receiving incoming calls during his first year. However, they said, the cadet and the professor had settled their differences by way of e-mail messages. The cadet's parents declined further comment.

Captain Borders wrote in a November 4 memorandum to the Air Force Academy's student body that he is "pleased to say that a 'cyber-episode' that started poorly has evolved into a more professional and academic discussion," noting that Mr. Kirstein has offered a "sincere" apology to Mr. Krupiel, which the cadet accepted. Captain Borders also apologized to Mr. Kirstein for the "great vigor" with which the professor's private communication with a cadet was made public.



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